EXCEPTIONAL MEETS UNIVERSAL:
MOSCOW AND WASHINGTON
AT THE UNITED NATIONS

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A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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This report is one in a series commissioned by The Century Foundation to explore issues of interest to American policymakers regarding Russia, aimed at identifying a framework for U.S.-Russian relations and policy options for a new administration and Congress that could help right the two countries' troubled relationship at a crucial juncture. The papers in the series explore significant aspects of U.S.-Russian relations, outlining a broad range of reasons why Russia matters for American foreign policy and framing bilateral and multilateral approaches to Russia for U.S. consideration. A high-level working group, co-chaired by Gary Hart, former U.S. senator from Colorado, and Jack F. Matlock, Jr., former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, has provided direction to the project and offered recommendations for action that the United States might take.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Century Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

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INTRODUCTION

When times are good, the United Nations provides a global stage to showcase cooperative efforts between Moscow and Washington to advance common interests. When times are bad, difficult bilateral relations take on an even more malignant cast as they are projected on the UN's global screen and as each side seeks to caricature the other and to curry favor from the 190 other member states. Much of the time, however, the very scope of the world body's seemingly limitless agenda and the virtual universality of its membership provide a uniquely varied terrain over which to see the nuances of Russian-American relations. Today, as Moscow and Washington struggle to adjust to changing times and to transitions in global geopolitics not of their making and not necessarily in the narrow interests of either capital, it is the complexity of their relationship that stands out.

After years of frustrated relations, 2009 has emerged as one of change, as the United States and the Russian Federation, each with new leadership and each in its own way, have sought to push the "restart button" on their bilateral relationship. As in earlier years of promise, the realization of change will no doubt come more gradually and grudgingly than the encouraging rhetoric. And as before, some of the more interesting developments will be played out at the United Nations and in other multilateral fora. These days, for two unavoidable and related reasons, the multilateral agenda has to be seen as unusually compelling, even to those cynics (or "realists") in both capitals who have long regarded international law and institutions as little more than distractions from the core bilateral relationship. First, the most demanding issues of the day—such as the global economic crisis, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, climate change, acute regional crises, and state fragility—demand enhanced multilateral cooperation, whether through the United Nations, the G-20, regional bodies, or most often, some creative combination of existing and ad hoc arrangements. Second, neither Russia nor America is the superpower it once aspired to be. Each needs help to get things done, as well as law and institutional frameworks to provide standards of legitimacy for emerging powers and vehicles for organizing international responses to the challenges the interstate system faces from violent and disruptive non-state actors.

Though Washington and Moscow no longer exercise the dominant role in the United Nations that they did in its early years, they do share a certain sense of ownership of the institution as the two players that most shaped its initial conception and Charter. They recognize, of course, that the initial club of 51 allies has been transformed in many ways with the addition of another 141 disparate members, most of them from less affluent neighborhoods and not aligned with either of the two founding capitals. In terms of UN reform, Washington and Moscow have tended to favor making haste slowly. They believe in change, of course, but only in controllable, discrete, and easily digestible increments. Largely agreeing on the need to curb UN budget growth, to limit the ambitions of the General Assembly, and to preserve the prerogatives of the Security Council and its five permanent members, they have come together repeatedly to stall or steer change processes within the world body. Neither has favored a major expansion of the Security Council or giving any new permanent members the veto power they have both enjoyed and used with some frequency (see below). On some important management issues, such as on retaining the independence of the international civil service and highlighting the role of the secretary-general, Moscow and Washington have long differed.

The hopes and dreams of 1945 were soon tempered in both capitals by a sober recognition of the limits both of their bilateral relationship and of the global institution itself. Multilateralism was never considered by either nation as an end in itself. Policy towards the UN was contingent on the bilateral relationship not the other way around. This instrumental approach could be seen most vividly and starkly, of course, during the cold war years. For those four decades, Soviet policymakers seemed to view international institutions as little more than political and ideological battlegrounds. Much of the U.S. foreign policy establishment held similarly narrow and utilitarian views of the purpose of these bodies.

As suggested above, this brief report asserts that times have changed as events have led both capitals to a keener appreciation of the value of such institutions to achieving their core national interests. It cautions, however, against rash expectations on either the bilateral or multilateral plane. The report opens with a brief sketch of the historical framework within which Russian and American views of global institutions have evolved. It then goes on to offer some initial thoughts on points of convergence and divergence in their respective attitudes toward international organizations, particularly toward the United Nations, and on how these could condition the prospects for the evolution of the international order and, more particularly, for the course of Russian-American relations.

Two Sides of the Same Exceptionalist Coin?

Neither the United States nor the Russia Federation/Soviet Union has fit easily into broad-based international organizations. Both have had more than their share of exceptionalist tendencies, in part because they are large continental powers, have had quite distinct histories that have tended to set them apart from other nations, have often been preoccupied with domestic matters, and have had their worldviews infused with significant ideological or messianic impulses. Though U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was its chief architect, the United States never joined the League of Nations. The Soviet Union, openly skeptical and dismissive of the decidedly bourgeois league, did not join until 1934, and then five years later, following its invasion of Finland, had the dubious distinction of being the only member state to be expelled from the world body.

In crafting the successor United Nations, Soviet and American diplomats, acutely aware of the league's manifold shortcomings, insisted that they had to have the power to veto non-procedural decisions by its relatively powerful Security Council. There is ample evidence that neither would have joined without that assurance, though the Soviets were particularly vocal in that regard. Soviet officials were acutely aware that the numbers game in the new world body would not be in their favor for the foreseeable future. In 1945, the other three permanent members of the Security Council were much closer to Washington than Moscow and countries from the Western Hemisphere were disproportionately represented in the General Assembly. Ironically, for many years it was Moscow that complained about the automatic majority in the General Assembly. After initially opposing extending the agenda of the United Nations beyond core peace, security, and political issues, Soviet representatives tended to downplay the importance of the General Assembly and to emphasize the value of the Security Council as a way of extending the wartime collaboration with Washington and, to a lesser extent, other Western capitals. The unanimity rule—or veto—in the Security Council was therefore paramount in their eyes, for reasons both of defense and of potential cooperation.

At the founding conference in San Francisco, the United States played a more vocal role in defending the unanimity provisions, contending, among other things, that the Soviet delegation might well walk if this prerogative was brought into question. In practice, neither country has been shy about blocking Security Council actions to which they have taken strong exception. Indeed, the two countries account for almost four out of five vetoes (79 percent) that have been cast to date.

As expected, the Soviets were the first to employ this blocking tool extensively. Indeed, Moscow cast 108 vetoes before the United States cast its first (in 1970, with the United Kingdom, on Southern Rhodesia). Many of these were to deny the membership applications of countries deemed pro-Western, as Moscow sought to keep its numerical disadvantage from getting worse. The fact that Washington was able to avoid resorting to the veto for the United Nations's first quarter century was interpreted widely as a sign of its superior power position in the organization (and in the world outside). With the influx of large numbers of newly independent countries from Africa and Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, however, Washington found itself on the defensive with increasing frequency. It, too, used the veto repeatedly to block a membership application (Vietnam in the mid-1970s). Nine times between 1973 and 1990, the United States vetoed Security Council resolutions on issues in Central America, its very backyard. (Six were related to Nicaragua and three to Panama.) The majority of the other vetoes cast by the United States concerned the Middle East or Southern Africa, places distant from the United States but of strategic significance in terms of the East-West competition. In the cold war years, the topics receiving Soviet vetoes also covered much of the world.

It would be tempting to label this tendency to block consensus in the Security Council as just an artifact of the cold war, when, as two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in an ideological as well as strategic struggle for world supremacy. True, vetoes were cast with far greater frequency in those years (5.4 annually, on average, for the United Nations's first 44 years compared to 1.2 for the past 19 years). But, as a percentage of the total vetoes cast by all five permanent members, the portion cast by Moscow or Washington actually has risen slightly since the end of the cold war (from 79 to 83 percent). The difference is that France and the United Kingdom, as a matter of policy, have refrained from casting any vetoes since the cold war. Of the four cast by China, two were joined by the Russian Federation—on sovereignty issues related to Myanmar (2007) and Zimbabwe (2008). The two "lonely" Chinese vetoes concerned the continuation of UN peace operations in countries that had some sort of relationship with Taiwan—Macedonia (1999) and Guatemala (1997). In addition to joining China on the two sovereignty-related vetoes (more on this later), the Russian Federation has cast four lonely ones: two on security matters relatively close to its periphery—Georgia (2009) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (1994)—and two on the financing and administration of the peacekeeping force in Cyprus (2004 and 1993). The United States has used the veto far more often than any of the other four permanent members in the post-cold war era, casting thirteen vetoes (57 percent of the total), all lonely and all but one on the Middle East (the exception, in 2002, related to the impunity of U.S. forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina).[1] Should U.S. dominance in the so-called real world outside the halls of the United Nations continue to ebb in the years ahead, its attachment to the veto provision could well rise apace.

The Tyranny of Numbers:
Adaptation and Cooperation

The rapid expansion of UN membership changed the political playing field in dramatic, but quite different, ways for Moscow and Washington. The founding conception of the world organization as an extension of and framework for the wartime alliance already had been battered by the polarizing effects of the cold war. The new members, with their nonaligned agenda, served as so many new nails in its coffin. They had little interest in promoting such a restricted, exclusionary, and outdated notion of the purpose of global organization. Even the hallowed Security Council was enlarged in 1965 from eleven to fifteen members, despite vocal opposition initially from both superpowers. (The demands to “democratize” the Security Council remain strong today, as does Russian and American caution.) These newly independent countries wanted neither to be treated as the objects of great power competition nor to see or to provoke a dangerous escalation in Soviet-American tensions. Nonalignment seemed to many to offer a way out of this dilemma.

Yet many of the developing capitals apparently perceived Washington, with its formerly colonialist allies in the Security Council and in NATO, as the stronger and potentially more threatening of the two poles, as well as the dominant actor within the world body. By orienting their policies in the world body toward Moscow, they could simultaneoulsy serve their ideological impulses toward a change agenda in terms of world order, their preferences for a relatively stable balance of power between East and West, and their desire for greater leverage within the United Nations itself. Moscow was all too ready to champion this perceived international proletariat and their anti-establishment causes, whether in Southern Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or Latin America. Moscow, it should be recalled, was locked through much of the cold war period not only in the existential struggle with the West, but also in a sustained political and ideological competition with China for leadership of the world socialist forces. This factor tended to push Moscow to the left, farther from Washington.[2]

As the political implications of the growth in UN membership increasingly became apparent, Soviet and American attitudes toward the Security Council and the General Assembly, respectively, naturally began to shift. As noted above, Washington came to echo the earlier Soviet complaints about automatic majorities in the General Assembly, while gaining a fresh appreciation of the value of the veto over unwanted Security Council action. The symmetry, however, was not complete. Washington had good reason to believe that the “correlation of forces,” to use a favorite Soviet term, had shifted far more and far less favorably within the United Nations than outside its walls. Rather than reflecting global realities, the United Nations had become a distorting mirror, according to many Americans, more suitable to a carnival than to world politics. Critics of the world body in Washington, including importantly those in Congress as well as those in the executive branch, had more levers than did the Kremlin with which to exert influence over what they perceived to be an increasingly dysfunctional world body. For one thing, the United States had, from the United Nations's earliest days, been a far more significant contributor of both assessed and voluntary funding to the UN system than had been the Soviet Union. Once the foremost critic of Soviet withholdings for the Congo peacekeeping operation in the early 1960s and a prime defender of the obligation to pay one's dues in full, on time, and without conditions, by the mid-1980s the United States began to withhold assessed funding for a variety of reasons, including linking payments to favored reform steps.

Moscow, for its part, was quick to join the developing country chorus in the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and other global fora for more robust development assistance and a reordering of the global economic order. The West, of course, would have to shoulder the economic burden of this transformation. Nevertheless, despite this rhetorical solidarity, Moscow clung to its initial stance at Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco in favor of a predominantly political and security agenda for the world body. Soviet diplomats saw no need to provide significant material support for any but a select few developing countries or for international development and humanitarian programs, given their contention that the former colonial powers could be blamed for and had a responsibility to rectify these disparities in the global economy. Nor did the Soviet Union rush to join either the international financial institutions or many of the UN specialized agencies. Rather than be co-opted (or appear to be co-opted) by participation in some of the leading economic pillars of the existing international architecture, Moscow sought to co-opt the ambitions, worries, and enthusiasms of the newly independent countries for its own strategic agenda.

During the 1970s and 1980s—the last half of the cold war—the United States and the Soviet Union were behaving much the way that realist international relations theorists would have predicted. International norms and institutions were playing a secondary and largely derivative function, caught in the dynamics of a world shaped more by raw power and chaos than order. The defining political currents still flowed from Washington and Moscow to international institutions, certainly not the reverse. The determined search of the major powers for relative gains in power and position in the state-based hierarchy of the day determined the prospects for and even the fate of international law and organization. Values and standards were being manipulated quite freely and readily by all sides. Beyond the skeletal order imposed by the cold war competition, chaos was largely the order of the day. With few exceptions, international institutions were relegated by Washington and Moscow to their appropriate place: far in the background. They acted as the stage, not the script. And everyone was busy trying to manipulate everyone else for their particular agenda. It may have been chaos, but, if so, only of a decidedly predictable and seemingly sustainable sort.

Collapse, Values, and Normality

The apparently stable instability of the cold war, however, was bound to end. Yet relatively few observers recognized the end game, despite much commentary on the decline of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the formal structures of international institutions appeared to confirm and sustain a pre-eminent position for the Soviet Union—at least in the security sphere—as both a key architect and a permanent member of the Security Council. On the other hand, the signs of Soviet decline and the increasingly independent stances voiced by representatives of countries that once only echoed Moscow's line could be seen and heard most tellingly in the daily work of the General Assembly and other broad-membership bodies. Within the Security Council, the encouraging collaborative effort among the five permanent members on helping to end the Iraq-Iran war was suggestive of post–cold war potential for a Security Council that could revive some of the promise of 1945.

Perhaps one of the reasons some realists might have missed the pending collapse of the Soviet Union was insufficient attention to so-called soft factors, such as values and institutions. Perhaps they were too dismissive of the significance of debates and discourse in places such as the United Nations that focused on multilateral rather than bilateral issues. Yet it was from the General Assembly Hall's rostrum that Mikhail Gorbachev chose to announce to the world his radically new worldview, whose reordered priorities represented a dramatic departure from past Soviet and, in some respects, American approaches to superpower relations and core strategic issues. More important, arguably it was the human rights, arms control, humanitarian, mobility, accountability, and transparency processes, most conspicuously including the Helsinki Accords (the Final Act of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe), that over time had the most corrosive effect on the institutions and measures of control within the Soviet system. In both countries, of course, there were well-placed individuals who were acutely aware of this dynamic between external and internal responsibilities and commitments, and indeed encouraged these multilateral processes precisely because of their subtle but far-reaching domestic political effects. Indeed, the mutually reinforcing interaction between global norm-setting and domestic reform movements in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe had a more rapid and profound effect, both politically and socially, than even most soft power advocates had expected. Prominent items on today's post-conflict peace-building agenda, such as security sector reform and rule of law matters, had an equal place in the Russian and Eastern European reform platforms of those transformative years as well.

But what of the elusive promise of an unprecedented era of collaboration between Moscow and Washington within the framework of a new or at least revitalized world order following the end of the cold war? Could the long-time adversaries find a mutually satisfactory basis for working together when their fortunes at the conclusion of the cold war seemed to be headed in opposite directions? Washington was resurgent, even triumphal in some quarters. Moscow was bound to be defensive, resentful, and suspicious at times. The United States was eager to harness global organizations, especially the

Security Council, to its causes, as in the case of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Moscow would go along, but only to a point. Its fears of 1945 about being outnumbered in the world body must have been revived by Washington's ambitions for a multilateral renaissance and by sporadic talk of a trans-regional caucus of democracies, while relations with Moscow seemed to be taken for granted. The United States, moreover, had been careful not to put all or even most of its security eggs in the United Nation's unreliable basket. The Clinton administration, for all of its talk of "assertive multilateralism," would not rule out the option of the unilateral use of force when multilateral processes were blocked and "national security" required decisive action.

Despite these caveats, there was, in the early 1990s, a marked upsurge in the utilization of the United Nation's peace and security tools, from mediation to peacekeeping and from arms control to enforcement through coalitions of the willing. For a few memorable years, Washington and, to a lesser extent, Moscow appeared to be in the vanguard of the movement to encourage fresh thinking and more robust use of multilateral capacities. No longer was their chief aim to retard the process of change and innovation on the defensive assumption that they had much more to lose than gain. It may well be that such periods of innovation are inherently unsustainable. Perhaps more prudence and less enthusiasm would have been in order. But, strikingly, it was conservative forces in Washington, as much as any in Moscow, that put the brakes on the blossoming tendency to perceive multilateralism as a key component of national security strategy and to conflate national and international security interests.

Washington's ambivalence about multilateral cooperation could be seen in its hot-and-cold attitudes toward peacekeeping operations and international arms control agreements during the first post-cold war decade. With keen American support—political, financial, and logistical—sixteen UN observer or peacekeeping missions were launched between 1988 and 1992, including several in the Western Hemisphere. President George H. W. Bush's final speech to the General Assembly, in September 1992, laid out an ambitious agenda of steps to strengthen UN peacekeeping capacities. The number of blue helmets on the ground surged to unprecedented levels. But as Bill Clinton, an unseasoned Democrat, moved into the White House, Republican and even some Democratic voices began to ask whether such far-flung UN missions were central to U.S. national security priorities. Then, in October 1993, the ambush of U.S. Rangers in Mogadishu, Somalia, served as a crude wake-up call for American exceptionalism. To many Americans, the incident came to symbolize a nightmare scenario: U.S. troops brutalized in a distant mission to forward vague global norms instead of unambiguous U.S. national interests. The president quickly retreated, wrongly pointing the finger of blame at the United Nations. Soon, U.S. withholdings for peacekeeping soared, as the number of deployed UN peacekeepers contracted as quickly as they had surged a few years before (only to rise again with the new century).

Unlike in earlier years, the chief fear in Washington following the cold war was not that of being taken advantage of by wily foes in the Kremlin. This time, the angst derived more from a distinct discomfort with the basic tenets of multilateral cooperation and of decisionmaking processes in which the United States would be one of many. While Moscow had gone along with the surge in UN peacekeeping missions, it was Washington that had, along with London and Paris, urged such “assertive multilateralism.” And it was Washington that even more quickly reversed course when the human, material, and most pointedly, political costs became too dear.

American policies toward multilateral arms control have followed a similarly uneven path since the end of the cold war. The United States has yet to ratify two of the higher-profile international agreements of this period: the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Anti-Personnel Land Mines Treaty (the Russian Federation is not a state party to the latter). In both cases, American experts and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were among the strongest advocates for the conventions.

In the case of the CTBT, a number of prominent opponents underscored that they were particularly uncomfortable with the multilateral nature of the treaty. Negotiating arms, it appeared, was something they had more confidence doing with America's former adversary on a bilateral basis than with scores of developing countries. In dramatic fashion, President Barack Obama has reversed course, using the UN Security Council, no less, to highlight his intention to move on both fronts simultaneously. In their September 2009 addresses to the General Assembly, both Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation were quick to claim that their agreement to move forward on bilateral nuclear reductions should help to spur progress at the 2010 review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As it has been for four decades, the latter remains a bedrock of Russian-American strategic collaboration (see below).

Turning from national security to human security, the picture remains every bit as clouded and nuanced. Here, too, American internationalists have been in the vanguard of developing norms and building institutions. Russian officials and experts alike generally have taken a more cautious tack. And, once again, conservative skeptics in the United States have sounded similar notes to their Russian counterparts. The United States, as a result, has been relatively good at preaching and practicing human rights (despite the setbacks for civil liberties during the post-9/11 George W. Bush administration), but not so good at ratifying some of the key conventions. It has been suggested that the latter flows from the former, in that Americans put less stock in the need for international arrangements given their domestic traditions, institutions, and remedies. Russia, whatever its domestic struggles over both law and practice on rights and its hesitancy to give human rights concerns a prominent place its foreign policy calculus, has had fewer reservations than the United States concerning becoming party to the relevant conventions. In 1981, for instance, the Soviet government completed its ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and did the same in 1990 for the Convention on the Rights of the Child (plus its Optional Protocol in 2008). The United States has failed to ratify either, despite NGO lobbying efforts.

When it came to the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC), arguably one of the key instruments for advancing human security, the U.S. posture followed the familiar pattern. American internationalists initially led the creative urge, both intellectually and politically, that resulted in the ICC. Then, more conservative circles in the United States (once again centered in Congress) mounted a determined campaign to undo what their countrymen had done so much to effect in the first place. Russia, less divided internally and more steadfast in its position, also opted to stay out of the ICC. Both powers, in this regard, continue to show their exceptionalist predilections.

At the 2005 World Summit, the assembled heads of state and government pledged to protect their populations by preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, as well as their incitement. Perhaps the ultimate human security litmus test, the responsibility to protect (RtoP) has subsequently been endorsed by both the Security Council and the General Assembly. Its enunciation followed the collective failure of the international community, including prominently the Security Council and its five permanent members, to anticipate or respond effectively to the unfolding mass atrocities in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the first post-cold war decade. As major military powers, both the United States and the Russian Federation have been cautious about accepting an obligation to act in a "timely and decisive manner," as the 2005 Summit Outcome Document called for. Moscow has been the more vocal of the two about its concerns, cautioning recently against taking "reckless and hasty steps" toward implementing the secretary-general's January 2009 report on the matter.[3] It has not acted, however, either to block or to refute the consensus adoption of both the 2005 Summit Outcome Document and the General Assembly's September 2009 resolution on RtoP.

Washington's path on RtoP, as on so many other issues, has meandered with changing times and administrations. Washington, like Moscow, went along with the 2005 language on the responsibility to protect, but with decidedly tempered enthusiasm. John Bolton, at that point the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, on the eve of the 2005 World Summit warned against equating the responsibilities of the state and the international community for RtoP, as they are "not of the same character," and underscored that "we do not accept that either the United Nations as a whole, or the Security Council, or individual states, have an obligation to intervene under international law."[4] As big powers, the United States and Russia appeared to be more concerned about preserving their sovereign right of choice, while smaller countries have fretted more about territorial sovereignty.[5] With the advent of the Obama administration, however, the United States finally embraced the responsibility to protect without the marked ambivalence of its predecessor.[6] In part, this would appear to reflect both lessons learned and the personal remorse of policymakers who had served in the Clinton administration at the time of Rwanda and Srebrenica.[7]

It is less clear, however, whether Washington and Moscow drew the same lessons from the decade of conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s. Russian analysts were unlikely to have perceived the mass atrocities in Rwanda and Srebrenica as part of an acute assault on human security, as opposed to distant and discrete events. Rwanda would have been seen as far from traditional spheres of Russian influence or of Moscow's responsibility. The break-up of the former Yugoslavia was quite another matter. It occurred at a point of vulnerability and weakness for Moscow, both perceived and real. There was little choice but to go along with the initially feckless efforts of the Europeans, the United Nations, and finally, with a more convincing combination of carrots and sticks, the United States to stop the bloodshed and to bring some sense of order to the region.

At the end of that turbulent decade, Moscow and Washington saw the growing violence in Kosovo through quite different lenses. Where many in the West saw a continuation of Serbian violations of human rights and humanitarian standards, Russian observers were more likely to perceive grave challenges from an overconfident West to Moscow's core geopolitical interests, not to mention to Slavic pride and brotherhood. The fact that Washington and its allies obtained authorization from NATO for the bombing of Serbia after failing to gain the Security Council's approval was particularly galling to Moscow. Washington's decision to invade Iraq a few years later, again without Security Council authorization, only served to underscore, in Russian eyes, how shallow and instrumental was the U.S. commitment either to international order or to the bilateral relationship. To many Americans, on the other hand, both cases, Kosovo and Iraq, illustrated the fundamental flaw of depending solely on multilateral cooperation through the Security Council to maintain international peace and security: allowing Russian (or Chinese) vetoes to prevent timely and effective action. Though the wording has varied a bit from administration to administration, it has always been axiomatic in U.S. foreign policy that, while multilateral measures are to be preferred in most cases, other options should not be excluded in dire circumstances when multilateral alternatives are not readily available.

Policymakers in Moscow appear to have employed similar tenets through the years. This tendency could be seen most vividly in places near the Soviet and then Russian periphery, where its military reach has been most credible. The most recent example was its August 2008 military intervention in South Ossetia and Georgia proper, places where international observers or peacekeepers were in place. Justified by President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as an effort to stop genocide and by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as an exercise in human security, in the responsibility to protect, and in self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter,[8] the intervention was seen in Washington and many other places as a crude demonstration of raw power. In response, among other largely symbolic gestures, pressing G-8 meetings were postponed, including those on questions of enduring mutual interest, such as counterterrorism and nuclear proliferation.

It was hardly coincidental that the first major arms agreement between Moscow and Washington was the NPT. As the treaty approaches its fortieth anniversary and, as noted above, another critical review conference, it is not surprising that discouraging other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons remains a goal on which Washington and Moscow can still readily agree. Both also recognize that this effort demands broad multilateral cooperation, as well as their concerted bilateral efforts to reduce or even eliminate their nuclear arsenals, to safeguard their stockpiles, and to curb their exports of nuclear materials and technologies to those who might misuse them. They have agreed on giving the Security Council a central role in addressing the most acute threats of proliferation by Iran and North Korea, though there had been little history of Security Council involvement in proliferation issues before the North Korean challenge to the NPT regime in the early 1990s. While Moscow remains more cautious than Washington on the use of sanctions in such cases, it is telling that it has nevertheless been possible to reach a consensus in the Security Council on layer after layer of sanctions packages in those situations.

Bilateral apprehensions about the dangers of further proliferation were only heightened by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Russia also has been a repeated target of terrorism, another emerging security threat on which convergence between Moscow and Washington has come relatively naturally and easily with changing times. For all of their conservatism about modifications in the ways in which the Security Council goes about its business, particularly on Moscow's part, the two capitals have led the effort to enlarge the Security Council's capacity—in terms of subordinate bodies, staff, reporting, monitoring, listing, capacity-building, country visits, and smart sanctions—to help implement, not just shape, UN counterterrorism policy. As a result, the repertoire of Security Council practice and the tools at its disposal have been enhanced markedly over the past decade. These enhancements testify to the power of initiative these two countries still possess in the world body when they choose to work together on matters of interest to much of the wider membership as well.

THE ART OF ADAPTATION

The United Nations has survived the cold war, a *Pax Americana*, and the asymmetrical geometry that has followed. What it has never seen is anything approaching true multipolarity based on a balance of power among a number of countries. Change has been normalcy for international institutions. Even over the four-plus decades of the cold war, international politics underwent unexpected seismic shifts. The United Nations and other global institutions learned to adapt to new demands and priorities. In turn, Moscow and Washington found distinct ways to cope with new UN members, expanded decisionmaking bodies, and reordered agendas. In the process of adaptation, however, the United Nations ceased to be their body or their creation. They have successfully resisted major structural renovations of their last bastion, the Security Council, while enhancing its capacities for addressing their growing concerns with terrorism and nonproliferation. Though Moscow votes more often with the majority in the General Assembly, Washington is more likely to be innovative and assertive in the United Nation's operational agencies and programs. Neither, however, looks much like a superpower these days within the halls of the United Nations. Indeed, when smaller countries are trying to gain the General Assembly's endorsement of high profile but controversial issues, such as counterterrorism or the responsibility to protect, they are not likely to welcome a loud endorsement from either of the former superpowers. In such circumstances, is it realistic to expect either Russia or the United States to go the full circle from being exceptional to being regular members? Should they? Could they?

The United States may have squandered much of its primacy in world affairs with its adventure in Iraq, its obsession with the war on terrorism, its mixed record in Afghanistan, and the exposure of its lack of financial discipline, but no other country possesses anything close to its range of hard power assets. The Obama administration, moreover, seems intent on proving that American cultural appeal and soft power potential remain valuable assets as well. The United States is, and will remain, number one for the foreseeable future. The emerging powers are likely to remain just that—emerging—for some years to come. But, as the misadventures and posturing of recent years have demonstrated amply and painfully, Washington's advantages can easily be squandered if not marshaled and employed in a measured and selective manner.

Moscow and Washington are not in parallel positions, and probably never have been. Asserting that the world should be multipolar, as President Medvedev has,[9] does not make it so. So the question is less what Moscow and Washington will do, but how, when, and where can the latter exercise effective—if modest—leadership within the changing global architecture and particularly within the United Nations and other multilateral institutions. Encouraging the G-8 to be replaced by the G-20 as the regular venue for high-level economic discussion, as the Obama administration managed in September 2009, is an encouraging example of such an initiative. The world does not have an excess of leadership these days. Pessimism, insularity, and small thinking are more common than optimism and strategic vision, even in the international institutions where they are needed the most.

The pragmatic, sober, and consultative leadership style so far demonstrated by the Obama administration seems well-suited to the times and to America's place in a world in transition (to what is less clear). Whether it will produce visible and tangible benefits for core U.S. national interests over the short term, however, remains to be seen. It should be acknowledged, moreover, that this promise stems in part from President Obama's apparent readiness to reengage the Russian Federation at the same time. One should not have to choose between stronger bilateral relations with other major powers and stronger leadership within international institutions. They should go hand in hand, as multilateral cooperation is built, in large part, on good bilateral relationships. On those rare occasions when both dimensions of Russian and American foreign policies have worked in tandem, their contribution to strengthening the global architecture has been nothing short of exceptional. In that, there is a valuable lesson for the future.

NOTES

1. These numbers do not count ballots on the Security Council's recommendation of candidates for the post of secretary-general, as these are not recorded votes. In 1996, the United States blocked Boutros Boutros-Ghali's candidature for the customary second term, just as China had blocked Kurt Waldheim's bid for an unprecedented third term fifteen years earlier. In 1951, the Soviet Union vetoed the nomination of Trygve Lie, the first secretary-general, for a second term and suggested several alternative possibilities from the developing world. In a constitutionally creative move, the United States managed to persuade the General Assembly to bypass the deadlocked Security Council and extend his term by three years. The Soviet delegates, however, refused to deal with him and he announced his resignation in November 1952.

2. In recent years, Moscow at times has had to compete with China for Washington's attention as well. For instance, observers have noted that in the Security Council, U.S. delegates seem to focus more attentively when Beijing's representatives are speaking than when any of the others are.

3 "Russia's Position at the 64th Session of the UN General Assembly," September 2009, paragraph 24, http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/interview/pos64en.htm. This author, as the secretary-general's special adviser, was the chief architect and author of the secretary-general's report, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect*, January 12, 2009, UN document A/63/677.

4 Letter from Ambassador John R. Bolton to UN Member States, August 30, 2005, http://www.reformtheun.org/index.php/issues/100?theme=alt4.

5. Edward C. Luck, "Sovereignty, Choice, and the Responsibility to Protect," *Global Responsibility to Protect*, vol. 1 (2009), 10–21.

6. The Obama administration's decision to seek election to the Human Rights Council was another example of its policy of reengagement with global processes and institutions. For a list of these steps, see President Obama's inaugural speech to the UN General Assembly, "Responsibility for Our Common Future," September 23, 2009, http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/september/129519.htm.

7. Statement by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, "Remembering the Rwandan Genocide," at the UN genocide remembrance, April 7, 2009, http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/april/126513.htm; Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative, "The UN Security Council and the Responsibility to Protect," June 15, 2009, http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/125977.htm; and Remarks by Ambassador Rosemary A. DiCarlo, U.S. Alternate Representative for Special Political Affairs, General Assembly Debate on the Responsibility to Protect, July 23, 2009, http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/2009/july/126546.htm.

8. "Medvedev Says Georgia Actions in S. Ossetia Genocide," ITAR-TASS, August 10, 2008, "Russia Sought to Protect S. Ossetia People, Not Overthrow Tbilisi Regime: Putin," ITAR-TASS, August 30, 2008, and "A Conversation with Sergey Lavrov

(New York: Council on Foreign Relations, September 24, 2008), http://www.cfr.org/publication/17384/conversation_with_sergey_lavrov.html.

9. In an August 31, 2008, interview with Russian television channels, President Medvedev contended that “the world should be multi-polar. A single-pole world is unacceptable. Domination is something we cannot allow. We cannot accept a world order in which one country makes all the decisions, even as serious and influential a country as the United States of America. Such a world is unstable and threatened by conflict.” Interview to television channels One, Rossia, and NTV, http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoots/docs/warfare/statement310808en.htm.

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